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SUBJECT: Dutch Opinion Makers -- Hopes and Fears
for Second Bush Term

11. Summary: In the days immediately following the US election, Ambassador Sobel and PA staff met with key groups of editors, commentators and journalists. Most Dutch commentators and reporters expressed uncertainty on how to read the elections, particularly the exit poll information that indicated that "moral values" had been a deciding factor in President Bush's win. Some were concerned that the Administration would be less inclined towards multilateralism and consultation in the second term. However, there is a sincere desire to see an improvement of US-European relations and many expressed interest in a "gesture" towards Europe from the White House. It should be noted that our meetings occurred right after the killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh while the public dialogue was focused mainly on terrorism, Islamic radicalism and integration in Dutch society.
End Summary

12. Introduction: In addition to monitoring press reaction to President Bush's re-election, Ambassador Sobel and PA staff gathered together two separate groups of observers for roundtable sessions and met with the editorial boards of Dutch dailies De Volkskrant and Trouw. These sessions gave the Ambassador the opportunity to emphasize President Bush's comments about putting political divisions behind us and to highlight the desire of the President to reach out to Europe. In return our contacts in these off-the-record sessions shared with us their candid impressions of the election and their concerns for a second Bush term.

Democracy at work?

13. Dutch interest in US elections was keen and coverage was heavy. All papers featured the results on their front pages. All major radio and television outlets broadcasted live from the US. During the lead-up to the elections, Dutch journalists tried nobly to understand the US electoral system and did an admirable job of explaining it to their readers, but this year's close electoral count versus the substantial popular result for President Bush led to continuing questions about the electoral system. Both Centrist Algemeen Dagblad (circ. 303,471) and Centrist NRC Handelsblad (circ. 262,422) called for reform of the US electoral system.

14. We debriefed a group of Dutch journalists who had traveled to the US in the period just prior to the election. They were extremely upbeat about the US, and the results of the elections based on their personal observations during their trip. They were universally impressed with the grass roots nature of US politics and the lively, dynamic democratic process. They came back convinced that the process worked. As one ventured: "the electoral vote is a better system than popular vote because it combated regionalism."

Struggle to Derive Meaning From Result

15. Many commentators struggled to reach conclusions on what the re-election of President Bush meant and left their listeners and readers with more questions. Centrist influential daily De Volkskrant (circ. 322,926) for example, claimed that Europeans did not judge the changes in the US correctly. "The fact that an average-performing Republican in the White House is allowed to stay provides food for thought. Will President Bush prove to be the uniting figure that he says he is? That question is important to Americans, but also important for countries which are closely linked to the US."

16. In the editorial board meetings on November 5, De Volkskrant and left-leaning Trouw (circ. 116,968) Ambassador Sobel had to react to anxious editors who worried out loud about the deep divides in the US and wondered about the effect of the issue of moral values on foreign policy. The Trouw editors persisted on the subject, telling the Ambassador that the US and the Netherlands did not share the same values (note: especially on the issue of gay marriage).

17. A journalist who had been in the US just prior to the election said that she "found it difficult to understand why

moral issues were more important to people than economics. "The Dutch don't understand," she said, "because these are no longer issues here."

Concerns about Unilateralism

18. The majority of journalists and editors that we talked to were skeptical about the President's promise to be a uniter. "Bush promised the same thing four years ago," one journalist told us. A reporter from the conservative Telegraaf countered that comment by saying "But he has learned a lot in the past four years." There was even more cynicism about a positive change in foreign policy.

18. Trouw's editorial on November 4 reflected their concern that foreign policy would not change. They wrote: "The American President and his advisors have a vision of the world, which is certainly not shared by everybody, but which they implement at full force - even with minimal assistance of other countries if necessary." In our meeting with the editors of Trouw on November 5, they were most interested in how the issues of moral values would effect broader foreign policy issues. They seemed concerned were about the long-term effects of the election on the world.

19. Other papers also expressed their concern for a continuation or intensification of the preemptive doctrine now that the President has a "mandate." For example, Algemeen Dagblad wrote: "Outside the US, there is the danger of a solo and headstrong performance." NRC suggested in a piece entitled "moral values more important than Iraq" said that the aggressive US foreign policy would continue and that the radical social and fiscal policies would be forcefully continued."

19. The editors at De Volkskrant were most concerned about the future of Iraq and wanted to know about the November 22 Iraqi conference and whether there was a timetable for pullout. They were also concerned about Iraqi elections.

A Fresh Start

10. The Conservative daily newspaper Telegraaf (circ. 776,004) had a much more upbeat editorial on the re-election. "The world has to get ready for four more years of Bush even though it had preferred Kerry. Hopefully a fresh start can be used to improve US-European relations. That will require the old continent to be more modest and recognize that America has the right and duty to protect itself against terror. The key focus should be on cooperation. Europe and the US share sufficient common values to make it happen."

11. A conference hosted by the Clingendael Institute in The Hague on November 12, heard calls for a more "Gaullist" vision of Europe amid concerns about unilateralism. However, pragmatists ruled the day with Institute Director van Staden arguing that security interests endure longer than the term of a president. Europe and the US must seriously renew their commitments to NATO again, he said.

Advice for the President

12. In our recent sessions we would often ask journalists and commentators what advice they would give to the newly re-elected president to improve relations with Europe. Interestingly, the advice often related more to style than to policy: "Change rhetoric", they commented.

13. "People need reassurance of the President's humility and ability to admit mistakes," said one editor. "Bush should search for consensus and cooperation. He should build new relationships based on trust."

14. What would the Dutch like to see in a second term? According to our contacts they want more cooperation with the EU and "less unilateralism." One reporter told us that on Iraq the Dutch fear that the US will secure the peace there and move on while the Dutch get bogged down in a lengthy peace keeping operation. The US should not approach Europe as "old and new", but as a whole. France and Germany have to be onboard one journalist advised. "He (President Bush) has to consider new rules of engagement in the world in a UN context," another urged. One editor felt that a gesture on an issue such as Kyoto would be beneficial.

15. A group of prominent journalists and commentators met over dinner and told us that even if Bush made a grand gesture of some sort towards Europe that Europeans would be so cynical that they would not be receptive. A Dutch commentator of Iranian origin encouraged the US to speak to students, both of Dutch and immigrant background.

Conclusion

¶16. While the Dutch opinion makers are currently concerned with Islamic extremism and integration, they are also concerned about what a second Bush administration means to them. They seem anxious for a gesture of some sort from the White House indicating a willingness to work together more. While they weren't terribly specific about what this gesture would entail, they indicated that they would be receptive to just about anything. Volkskrant, however, in their November 15 editorial commented that President Bush's gesture of traveling to Europe as soon as possible in order to strengthen transatlantic ties is a "laudable aspiration. But it might be more urgent for the President to have a good talk with the chief of the organization that is to provide the necessary support for Iraqi elections, " the paper concluded.

Our post-election encounters reveal little outward hostility to the US and some familiar unease about the future of transatlantic relations. However, on balance, what prevailed was relative optimism and a strong desire to continue the Dutch Atlanticist role.

SOBEL